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ABSTRACT

The New York State External High School Diploma Program is a competency-based assessment system serving adults who can demonstrate both basic and life skills. It represents an alternative to the General Educational Development (GED) program for busy, working adults--offering flexibility in time, location, and mode of assessment. Developed in the early 1970s, the program was originally conceived as best serving its clients in a community-based setting. But in the face of a changed federal education policy and shrinking resources, the program's research staff conducted studies in cooperation with the New York State Education Department to determine the feasibility of adapting the program to new settings where costs could be shared. It was determined that the External Diploma Program could be housed in the state's Division of Continuing Education adult centers, with some changes in the procedures used for assessing clients, as well as with administrative changes. As a result, seven External Diploma Program sites, located in adult education centers, were funded through June 30, 1982. The goal of the instituted changes has been to institutionalize the External Diploma Program, widen its base of support, and make it more cost-efficient without compromising its integrity. How well this has been accomplished will be determined by an evaluation after the funding end-date. (Author/KC)

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ADAPTING THE NEW YORK STATE EXTERNAL HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA PROGRAM TO NEW SETTINGS: MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGING FEDERAL PRIORITIES

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Introduction

The New York State External High School Diploma Program was born in the educational climate of the early seventies when experiments in alternative educational delivery systems were commonplace. Like many programs developed during that time, the External Diploma Program was tailored to serve the needs of a population not reached by more traditional programs, in this case adults lacking a high school diploma. In an era of relatively plentiful resources, program costs were not a primary concern. In 1980, at the dawning of the new era, the External Diploma Program was established in six sites across the state which were primarily rural and suburban and which were, for the most part, freestanding so that cost-sharing could not be done. The program had not developed a wide base of support as it might have done if it had been established in the major urban areas in the state nor had it become institutionalized as Adult Basic Education, GED, and English as a Second Language programs had by participating in established adult education delivery systems in the state. The program was vulnerable.

This paper describes how the Research and Evaluation staff of the External Diploma Program conducted studies for the State Education Department to find whether strategies could be developed for placing the program on a firmer foundation.

As federal resources shrink and as states find their resources stretched farther and farther, the small alternative programs created in the early seventies must find ways to survive. The challenge is to become institutionalized and more cost-efficient without sacrificing integrity.

Description

The New York State External High School Diploma Program is a competency-based assessment system for credentialing adults who lack a high school diploma. The program consists of a diagnostic phase in which the client is assessed in his/her

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strengths and weaknesses and where learning recommendations are made if the client has weaknesses in the basic skills, and a final assessment phase which consists of two parts: Generalized Assessment and Individualized Assessment. In Generalized Assessment, the candidate is given a series of tasks through the completion of which s/he must demonstrate with 100 percent accuracy competencies in basic and life skills. In Individualized Assessment, the candidate must demonstrate an occupational skill; a special skill, such as woodworking or photography; or readiness to do college-level work. At program completion, the adult receives a regular high school diploma awarded by the school district.

History of the Program

The program, developed by the Syracuse Research Corporation, began with a Ford Foundation Study in 1972 to determine whether an alternative credentialing system was needed by adults in New York State. It was found that 40 percent of the adults in New York State lacked a high school diploma and that many of these adults suffered from a classroom anxiety that made them poor candidates for the GED process. With support from the Division of Continuing Education, New York State Education Department, a task force was created to develop a program which was to be competency-based, individualized, and self-paced. Further, it was to be a program aimed at adults who, though uncredentialed, were already competent. There was to be no instructional component.

The program's emphasis was on the individual; its philosophical underpinning was humanistic. It was a product of the 1970s when funds for educational experimentation were plentiful. As the program developed, as the assessment system was set in place, two characteristics emerged. One was that a tutorial structure was established; that is, one assessor would work with one client at a time. Second, assessment procedures were established that were deliberately as different as possible from traditional paper and pencil tests. One of these was the use of an interview format for two of the tasks One of these interviews came to take about one hour; the other, about two hours. Thus, the program came to be highly labor intensive and highly time-consuming for staff. For each candidate, a staff member might well spend 20 to 25 hours assessing just his/her competencies.

Another pattern that developed was the creation of programs that were freestanding. As the program developed and the Division of Continuing Education continued to

support the program, six centers were established in New York. Of these, only two were able to share resources with other educational programs. These were both housed in BOCES. The other four were freestanding programs, though three of the four were housed in school district offices or converted schools. The fourth, in Syracuse, was housed in an old residence and was completely community-based.

The program has, from its inception, had a research/training/evaluation arm through the Syracuse Research Corporation. The Research and Evaluation staff refined the program, trained all EDP staff members around the state, conducted follow-up studies of program graduates, and evaluated all program sites for fidelity of program replication. The Syracuse Research Corporation also administered the program at its original site in Syracuse.

In 1979, the program received national validation by passing the Joint Dissemination Review Panel process and becoming a member of the National Diffusion Network. Dissemination activities to localities outside New York State, already begun, were intensified. The program remains a member of the National Diffusion Network.

The Studies

In the spring of 1981, at the beginning of the new federal administration, the Division of Continuing Education was faced with the prospect of cuts in federal adult education funds, funds it relied on heavily to support adult programs in New York and funds which had always supported the EDP programs. For the first time the cost-efficiency of the program was an issue. The External Diploma Program, developed in one era, was facing the exigencies of another.

What followed was a collaborative effort between the Research and Evaluation staff at the Syracuse Research Corporation and the State Education Department to find ways to keep a program whose value was established as an option for adults in New York State.

The Research and Evaluation staff proposed to conduct two studies in an effort to find ways to manage program resources more efficiently. This was not research conducted disinterestedly nor to add to the store of knowledge. It was conducted

by people vitally concerned to find ways of continuing the program for people with the same interest.

The first study, conducted at the six existing sites, replaced the ordinary annual evaluation conducted to assure that the program was being delivered in the same way at every center. Instead, it concentrated on organizational and resource management issues and looked, as well, at demographic characteristics of clients that might correlate with length of time in the program and ultimate success rate. The methods used were document review, staff interviews, and observation.

Recognizing the dangers inherent in the positive bias of Research and Evaluation staff, particularly in light of the fact that the Director of the Research and Evaluation Center was also the Director of the Syracuse EDP Assessment Center, another researcher from the Syracuse Research Corporation was chosen to conduct this study, one who had had no prior exposure to the External Diploma Program.

Important findings of this study included the following:

- At present (the time the study was conducted), the EDP does not serve the major urban populations in the state; present sites are primarily rural and suburban.
- In the two BOCES sites, costs are shared with other programs. These include costs for rent, utilities, supplies, travel, and advertising. And administrative costs are minimized. No such cost sharing has been done in the other four sites. However, even in the BOCES sites, the program is fairly isolated, having minimal interaction with other programs.
- Success rate in the program rises with age of participants. The minimum age for participation is 18. The age cohort experiencing the least success is that between 18-21.
- There is a perception among staff that the diagnostics are insufficiently rigorous and permit too many inappropriate clients into the assessment process; this increases costs.
- At some sites, assessors work minimum hours (six or seven per week). They must limit their schedules and therefore lack flexibility when faced with no-shows. The need to coordinate is by definition increased, yet their limited time at the center makes such coordination difficult.

The second study conducted, parallel to the first, had as its purpose to determine the feasibility of integrating the External Diploma Program into adult learning centers in New York State. The advantages of doing this were several: costs could be shared with other programs; the program could be offered in more urban environments since adult learning centers tend to be located in cities; the program could become institutionalized by participating in established adult education delivery systems; and adults served by those centers would be benefited by having another option available to them. What Research and Evaluation staff needed to learn were several things:

- To what extent did adult learning center staff have knowledge of and positive attitudes toward the EDP?
- What characteristics of adult learning center organization, instructional resources, patterns of interaction with clients, and staffing patterns were compatible or incompatible with EDP characteristics?
- To what extent could the EDP plug into the centralized intake and counseling procedures in use in adult learning centers with a minimal degree of adaptation?

Since a thorough knowledge of the External Diploma Program was a prerequisite for answering these questions, Research and Evaluation staff conducted this study.

Site visits were conducted to seven adult learning centers in New York State. They consisted of interviews with center directors and other appropriate staff, observation, document review where appropriate, and review of instructional materials. A checklist was developed to gather data on the following:

- Attitudes of center staffs toward the EDP;
- Instructional practices;
- Programs run by the center;
- Staff capacity;
- Diagnostic process and procedures;
- Prescriptive practices;
- Degree of individualization in prescriptive and instructional practices;
- Linkages among programs within the center;

- Linkages of the center with community resources;
- Opportunities for vocational training;
- Demographic data on clients served by the center; and
- Space availability for private or semi-private work.

Case studies of each of the seven adult learning centers which discussed the general characteristics of each center and characteristics of the center relevant to incorporation of the External Diploma Program were developed. General findings included:

- Adult centers tend to be housed in district school buildings.
- Indirect costs tend to be paid by school districts.
- The centers have a centralized intake and diagnostic procedure for clients of all programs which, with some modifications, the EDP can take advantage of.
- The centers offer the same core program: Adult Basic Education classes, GED preparation, English as a Second Language, and a life skills program. Other programs are funded through special grants.
- Center staff tend to be certified teachers.
- Centers have flexible hours, including evenings.
- Centers have satellite and outreach programs and generally strong linkages to occupational programs.
- Centers have differing levels of individualization but all have some.
- Project directors are knowledgeable of and positive toward the External Diploma Program.

The next step in the process was to suggest ways of adapting the EDP to adult centers using the information gleaned from both studies. Several principles guided this most delicate task: (1) the integrity of the program could not be violated. The competencies, the conditions under which they were to be demonstrated, and the criteria used in evaluating them comprised a validated process which could not be modified without considerable field-testing; (2) there should be a way of lowering client attrition rates and shortening the time it took clients to complete the program so that staff time could be used more efficiently;

(3) where the External Diploma Program could reasonably share costs with other programs, ways should be found to do this; and (4) ways should be found to fully integrate the program into centers so that staffs could be shared among programs and a functioning referral system could be instituted.

With these principles in mind, it became clear that modifications could and should be made in the diagnostic process and that this would in no way violate the integrity of the final assessment phase of the program. The Research and Evaluation staff proposed several changes to the State Education Department:

- That the diagnostic process be shortened by removing the math and reading diagnostics;
- That all clients proceed through the centralized intake procedures in effect in adult centers where a reading and a math test would be administered. These tests would be used as screeners. Clients who did not pass at the appropriate level would be counseled into another program. Those who passed the screeners would be admitted to the diagnostic phase of the program;
- That one of the diagnostics be administered during Generalized Assessment where it was actually used;
- That the remaining basic skills diagnostic, the writing test, be administered in a group setting rather than individually;
- That the two diagnostics which measure clients' readiness for the competencies to be demonstrated in final assessment be retained.

These changes accomplished several things. They lowered the number of instruments administered during diagnosis from six to three; they ensured that only better qualified clients would pass the screener and be admitted into diagnosis; they made use of center resources to do the initial screening; and they further helped save staff time by substituting group administration of the writing diagnostic for individual administration. In addition, Research and Evaluation staff recommended that existing center staff, ABE or GED teachers, be trained in the External Diploma Program to facilitate integration.

Present Status

In the summer of 1981, seven sites were selected by the Division of Continuing Education, through an RFP process, to participate in the External Diploma Program.

Of these, two were "old" sites. (Not surprisingly, these were the two BOCES sites.) In October 1981, Research and Evaluation staff trained assessors at all these sites in the modified program.

Research and Evaluation staff are providing ongoing technical assistance to the sites whose initial grants will continue until June 30, 1982. Initial data on the programs will be analyzed shortly after that date. Staff are beginning to collect data which are still sketchy at this time because the programs have not yet processed large numbers of clients. Among the questions of vital interest are:

- How well has the External Diploma Program been integrated with other center offerings? To what extent does referral among programs take place, for example?
- How long, on the average, does it now take clients to complete the program? We assume that better qualified candidates will have faster completion rates.
- To what extent has the attrition rate for the program dropped as a result of the new screening mechanism?
- What are the demographic characteristics of clients compared to those in the old program now that sites have an urban bias instead of a rural/suburban bias, and now that program entrance requirements are more rigorous?
- Has the EDP program affected, positively or negatively, other center programs? In what ways?
- Does it cost less under the new system to graduate an EDP candidate than it did under the old system? This question is tricky because staff efficiency, on the average, will be lower than it was under the old system due to a late start-up date (programs didn't get underway until November), and staff unfamiliarity with the program during the initial months.

In summary, the goal of both the Research and Evaluation staff and the State Education Department has been to institutionalize the External Diploma Program, widen its base of support, and make it more cost-efficient without compromising its integrity. In an era of decreasing federal support for education, those programs which have depended on such support must adapt to the new climate or go out of existence. We are hopeful that the groundwork has been laid to keep the External Diploma Program both viable and growing.